

Proper Practices in Public Worship

Woman's Head Coverings

1 Corinthians 11:2-18

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Note: The following is a transcript of a message given in January of 1996 by the late Dr. James Boyer, who was a colleague of Dr. John Whitcomb for many years. The views presented in this article are solely Dr. Boyer's, and are not necessarily those of Dr. Whitcomb or Whitcomb Ministries, Inc., which posts this writing here for its theological and historical value. Throughout this transcript, italics are used to represent points of emphasis in Dr. Boyer's original message.

The item Paul deals with in this chapter of 1 Corinthians has to do with two matters relating to proper practices in their public church meetings. Paul speaks of them as "ordinances" as it is translated by the King James Version, but the sense of the word Paul uses is certainly not what we understand by that word. His word more accurately refers to what we would call "tradition." Literally, it means "things handed down," ways of doing things which have come down to us from those who have gone before us. They may be good or bad. In Matt. 15:2-3 it is obviously being used in a bad sense, "Why do you transgress the commandments of God by your *tradition*?" *Here* it is clearly used in a good sense; Paul congratulates them that they were "keeping the ordinances/traditions/passed-down-things which I passed down to you." And in verse 23 he uses the same word for the instructions about the Lord's Supper, the other "tradition" which he "handed down" to them.

Two topics are dealt with in this chapter. Today we will look at the first, the head covering for women.

1A. Some Background Material

Public worship is under consideration here. The two topics in this chapter are put one beside the other and their attitude toward them is compared. The second one is a matter of public worship, the Lord's Supper. That strongly suggests that this, too, has to do with public worship. Here, the head covering for women is related to "praying

and prophesying,” verses 4 and 5. The fact that women did in fact prophesy in the early church is indicated, not only by this passage, but in Acts 21:9 (the four daughters of Philip). This is not contrary to the teaching of 1 Tim. 2:12, if that passage is read without the comma, “I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority *over the man*” (KJV, emphasis added).

The covering here must be understood as an artificial covering, *not the hair*. The word is used of the veil worn by the harlot in Gen. 38:15 to conceal her identity; it could not have been her hair. It is also used of the covering of the Tabernacle in Ex. 26:14, certainly not hair. In verse 6 here, it says, “if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn” (in the original it is “shaved with a razor”). It would make little sense if we understood the covering to be the hair; “if a woman has no hair let her also have her head shaved!” The text in verse 15 does speak of the hair as a covering, but there it is an entirely different word, and it is used to argue for the natural propriety of this other covering. I think it is obvious that in verse 4, when it compares the man’s praying or prophesying *with his head covered*, it does not mean, “with his hair on.”

The significance of this covering, or of this practice, is very plainly stated here: the woman wearing it is indicating her subordination to the headship of the man. The rest of this discussion gives us eight arguments to prove that point. This is only one of many places where this teaching is found in the Scriptures. I believe that we, at least most of us in this class, agree.

There is no description given of this covering, therefore it is probably not very important. It should not be likened to the “veil,” a covering over the face, such as is practiced by Arab or Muslim women. There is nothing to indicate that it was a specially designed “prayer covering” known to us from some church groups, but of course neither is there anything which forbids such. Probably in our terminology the closest term is the simple word “hat.”

It is not explicitly stated whether *all* women, or only married women, were to wear the covering. The arguments, for the most part, would apply to *all* women. The concept of the headship of the man and the subordination of the woman seems to be generic rather than specific. The command referred to earlier, forbidding a woman to teach or usurp authority over a man, seems to be wider in application than only her husband.

2A. The Development of Paul's Argument

His first argument is that women's place in the divine order teaches it (verses 3-5, 7). Reading from the NASB version, "I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved...For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man." The reasoning seems to go something like this: [I quote from one commentator, Findlay] "The man has no intervening lord in creation (cf. verse 9); he stands forth in worship amidst his family, with no visible superior, holding headship direct from his Maker, and brought by his manhood into direct responsibility to Him 'through whom are all things.' In contrast, the woman has an intermediate head, the man, and her recognition of that proper order is expressed by wearing a covering."* The word "head" refers to rank, position, authority, *not to ability*. There is no inference of inferiority.

A modern illustration of this distinction is seen in the relation between captain and private in the army. The private may be, and sometimes is, superior to his captain in many ways – physical strength, mental skills, and intellectual ability – but he ranks under his captain in authority and responsibility; the captain gives the orders. A very good illustration from the Scriptures is to be seen in the Godhead. The Father stands in first place; He makes the decisions and gives the orders. The Son is subordinate to

the Father, He does the will of His Father. The Holy Spirit is subordinate to both. Yet all three are equally God – eternal, all-wise, all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.

The second argument Paul uses is that social propriety calls for a covering (verses 5 and 6): “Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head” (KJV). That is, her uncovered head is usurping the place of the man, whose head has the privilege of being uncovered before God. She might as well do something else that is recognized as being shameful – that is, cutting off her hair or shaving her head.

This and verse 13 below are the only ones of the eight arguments Paul uses which can in any way be related to social customs. This often has been used as an excuse for rejecting any modern application of this Scripture – “that was an ancient custom; we don’t have that custom anymore; therefore, it doesn’t apply to us.” I once felt comfortable with that excuse, before I seriously studied this chapter. Then I realized that it *still* is a shame for a woman to have her whole head shaved with a razor!

The third argument (verses 7 to 9) is based on the Scriptural account of creation. The man was created in the image and glory of God, but the woman is “the glory of the man.” Also, “the man was not of [from] the woman, but the woman was of [from] the man.” Also, “the man was not created for the woman, but the woman was created for the man.” There was a great difference in the manner of their creation. Man was created first, directly from God’s hand. Woman was created later, out of the man’s side. Paul sees in this a basis for the difference between men and women with regard to wearing a head covering.

The fourth argument involves the effect of this practice on the angels (verse 10). “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.” It is a puzzling statement and a difficult one to interpret. The expression “power on her head” probably refers to the covering as a *symbol* of her power, authority, right to pray or prophesy. The NASB reads: “Therefore the woman ought to have *a symbol of*

authority on her head, because of the angels” (italics in original). The reference to angels is very uncertain. The sense seems to be that the angels, who are present and who are witness to the activities of God’s people on earth, and thus would know the divinely-intended significance of the head covering, would be surprised and hurt by the careless neglect of it. It probably is not to be seen as a reference to the Genesis 6 flood. The point seems to be, “Do what is right; the angels are watching.”

In the fifth argument (really, more a warning than an argument) Paul warns the readers against a false inference which might be made from his reasoning. He explains that what he has said about the creation of man and of women (verses 11 and 12, cf. verses 7 to 9), does not make the woman inferior to the man, but only subordinate in rank.

The sixth argument, and possibly the second (see above), are the only ones which are even remotely associated with the customs of the day. Paul says in effect (verse 13), “What do *you* think? Is it proper to pray to God without the covering?” From the context, he obviously felt comfortable in throwing out such a question because in his mind he could see only one possible answer: “No.”

The seventh argument (verses 14 and 15) is that the facts of nature argue for a covering. Nature gives women more hair; long hair on a man is shameful, but long hair on a woman is a glory to her. That shows the propriety and need for a woman’s head to be well covered, not only with hair, but with another covering.

Is this scientifically true? One biology teacher at Grace (College) claimed that it is true, arguing that the genes which govern hair growth are different in the sexes. Other science teachers deny it. All my personal observation has been that it is basically true, – most women I have seen have more hair than most of the men that I have seen. But the other day I saw a man (at least I think it was a man, it is hard to tell these days) who had hair reaching below his belt!

I believe it was true even back in Bible times. We have many pictures and statues of Roman and Greek men and women, and they show, as it seems to me, men with short hair as compared with the longer hair shown on the women. Whether this difference is due to “genes” or to society whims I cannot judge.

And of course, the problem is complicated by the question, “How long is long? And how long is short?”

While we may not be able to prove these questions by science, it seems to me to be clear that this Scripture passage must be taken as true. There is a difference, and the difference argues for the propriety of a covering for a woman’s head.

The eighth, and last, argument is very strong; the universal practice of the early churches was that women did wear head coverings in church when they prayed or prophesied. The King James Version is a bit confusing here, so let me read it from the New American Standard Bible, verse 16: “But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.”

3A. Where Does This Leave Us?

“It seems so insignificant! Why be concerned?” Answer: God said it; isn’t that enough?

“There are a number of statements we don’t understand.” True. There are some questions, problems. Be honest about it: isn’t it pretty clear what He is saying?

“It no longer means what it did then.” Why not? Because it is not being taught! What is the solution? Teach it!

Remember Paul commended them *because they were wearing the coverings* even though they did not understand why. What would he say about us, if we refuse to obey it *after we have been shown why*?

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Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

*Findlay, G. G. *St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. Expositors Greek Testament*. London, 1900; reprinted Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961.